



Taking it to the Streets

Lack of Paths, Sidewalks Means Few Safe Places to Walk, Bike

By Lesley Mahoney

Catherine Looby spotted a woman pushing a baby stroller down Route 3A on a Friday night a few weeks ago. That same night, she had to drive with extra caution along the street, sandwiched between a boy on a bicycle and oncoming traffic.

Cynthia Simmons and her two children all bike on Washington Street. Although it's no 3A, only

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— Pat Loring, chairman of the town's open space committee

sections of it have sidewalks.

"We do it," she said, "but I don't feel good about it."

Another Duxbury resident has

two daughters, ages 10 and 12.

They like to bike, too. But instead of staying in town when the urge to ride strikes, they pack up their bikes and head for the Cape Cod Canal bike path.

While some brave it, others avoid it. Traveling, that is — by foot, bike or RollerBlades — in a town where sidewalks and bike

paths are the exception.

For some, a network of paths and trails gets them from one place to another, keeping them away from busy streets. But according to Duxbury Conservation Agent Joe Grady, such paths primarily enjoy neighborhood activity. Because they cross both public and private ways, he said, nothing can be done to formalize them. They are used at the discretion of traveler and land owner.

But there seems to be a desire for something more formal, a network everyone can access. According to the results of the town's comprehensive 1995 survey,



Bicyclists on Route 3A share the road with sometimes heavy traffic.

Staff Photo by Chris Bernstein

STREETS AND BYWAYS

Bikes Continued

which was mailed to 9,047 registered Duxbury voters, sentiment for change may be stirring.

Of the survey's 2,375 respondents, 64 percent said they would favor sidewalks or bike paths on major streets for pedestrian safety. Fifty-eight percent said they would favor a bike path exclusively. Demographically, newer residents and those with children were more likely to favor sidewalks or bike paths.

The percentages clearly indicate a mandate from the town, said Pat Loring, chairman of the town's open space committee, who called it a "motherhood and apple pie" issue.

"Duxbury is ... very conducive to walking," she said, "but (pedestrians are hampered by) the way the town is laid out and the fact that there are several small commercial areas but no safe way to (get) there but the middle of the road."

Echoes of the '80s

These sentiments echo those of about 15 years ago, when a concern for public safety, a motivation to link the major segments of town for pedestrians and the availability of state funds sparked the formation of the Duxbury

bikeway committee.

In its 1981 report to the town, the committee argued that the purpose of a bikeway was to provide for "the safe access of those who bike, walk or jog." This rationale, which "emphasized safe access for growing numbers of pedestrians on our narrow but fast-moving roads," was developed to support "the need and feasibility" of a bikeway in Duxbury.

According to Paul Brogna, who was the town engineer at the time, the state was advertising funds for the purpose of promoting bike paths. Accordingly, the state project review committee approved the Duxbury bikeway committee's proposal and awarded the town \$134,250 for the construction of the bikeway. The town's share was figured at \$44,750, a quarter of the project's cost.

By 1986, the bikeway committee had completed phase one of the bikeway project, stretching from Cedar Street to where Westford Farm Road meets West Street. But when the money ran out, the project ceased, and the small, green "Bike Path" sign at the intersection of St. George

and Tremont streets was the last of its kind to go up in town. The committee announced its disbandment in its 1986 report.

Martha MacFarland, a member of the committee, attributes the end of the group, and the end of the bikeway, to a number of factors. Once the state funds ran out, a request for an additional \$143,000 in funding for additional bikeways to Temple Street was denied at the June 1986 Town Meeting. There was, she said, an air of frustration within the community.

But even before money was denied, the committee faced considerable obstacles.

"We ran into hassles everywhere," MacFarland said, speaking of long and ultimately unsuccessful battles with the telephone company in an effort to move a telephone pole on the West Street strip.

"We had to go to every house in the area, knocking on doors to get easements," she said. Sometimes property owners gave their land without requests for compensation, while others wanted stone walls or grass between their property and the path.

Now, 10 years later, MacFarland has mixed emotions about the finished product.

"I look at (the bikeway) every time I go by and think of the community effort that went into it," she said. "And it makes me kind of smile for all the effort that took place. At the same time, it makes me angry that we weren't able to go further. At

least we have something in the area of the school."

History Revisited?

The spirit that generated the construction of Duxbury's bikeway a decade ago lingers still.

In a time when an emphasis on fitness is rising, there are more people biking and walking. Duxbury's roads, however, remain "narrow but fast-moving."

This conflict is not lost on town officials, but the half-finished dream from the '80s is making little progress toward becoming a reality in the '90s.

On a small scale, the town planning board's tradition of waiving sidewalks for subdivisions took a turn last month when sidewalks were approved for Freeman Farms, a new 17-house subdivision.

Each time subdivision plans come up, Town Planner Tom Broadrick said, the planning board considers the implementation of sidewalks, taking the public input into consideration. The board is now drafting a new set of subdivision regulations to formally change the way the issue of sidewalks within subdivisions is treated. A public hearing on the new rules is scheduled for Oct. 21.

While these new rules may generate sidewalks within new developments, what about the roads edged with homes where

sidewalks were previously waived? Any alterations would require the permission of the land owners through door-to-door easement requests, mirroring the efforts of the bikeway committee in the early '80s.

"I think we really, really need to look at the issue of sidewalks," said Andre Martecchini, chairman of the planning board, who called the situation on the main

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— Martha MacFarland,
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roads "very dangerous" and spoke of the desire to connect all the major parts of town.

It is a desire with which Broadrick is familiar.

"We hear the public telling us, 'We wish you'd connect the parts of town,'" he said, citing as an example a possible link between Halls Corner, Snug Harbor and the high school.

But Martecchini warned that the town must look at feasible ways to approach the issue in order to meet approval from the residents.

Of course, there is the issue of easements.

And funding. If construction were to occur on a state-owned highway such as Route 3A or Route 14, permission as well as money would need to be granted from the state. Both Broadrick and Martecchini stressed the importance of having a plan in hand before the state can be approached for grants.

Currently, there are no town funds reserved expressly for sidewalks. Martecchini proposed ways to lessen the financial blow by contracting within the town for services, as the original bikeway committee did.

Safety vs. Aesthetics

But since Duxbury prides itself on its rural nature, the concept of a sidewalk may not sit well aesthetically. Many officials recognize the issue of aesthetics as a potential argument.

Cynthia Simmons, the Duxbury mother who spoke of riding bikes on Washington Street, is one resident who doesn't see bike paths or sidewalks as an aesthetic threat.

"I don't think it will ruin the character of the town," she said.

Others do, but planning board member George Wadsworth said there are ways to make a safety network more visually attractive. He also stressed the importance of distinguishing between a bike path and a sidewalk. A bike path, he said, is an informal, meandering path, while a sidewalk is a more formal concrete structure with granite curbing. Supporting one or the other, he said, is a matter of style.

Wadsworth cited the town of Lincoln, where he spent a fair amount of his life, as an example of town that created a bike path network while preserving its rural nature.

He suggested looking very seriously at the Old Colony Railroad bed for a possible location for a bike path. The problem, however, is that the land is now private property, so considerable easements would need to be acquired.

Easements, however, do not have to be universally granted along a proposed strip for a

"You can move in and out," Wadsworth said.

Department of Public Works Director Walter Tonaszuck is a supporter of sidewalks. He added, "People don't necessarily support it in front of their house."

Whatever the plan, Wadsworth explained that it is essential to garner political support for a project of this nature and scope. While the planning board's public hearing Oct. 10 was primarily for the purpose of discussing about changes to rules and regulations for subdivision, Broadrick said the discussion of sidewalks on a larger scale did not surprise the board.